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Responsibility for Global Poverty

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Abstract

This paper has two aims. The first is to describe several sources of the moral responsibility to remedy or alleviate global poverty—reasons why an agent might have such a responsibility. The second is to consider what *sorts* of agents bear the responsibilities associated with each source—in particular, whether they are collective agents like states, societies, or corporations, on the one hand, or individual human beings on the other. We often talk about *our* responsibilities to the poorest people in the world, or what *we* owe them. So the question is who this *we* is. I shall argue that the answer depends on the source of the responsibility. Some responsibilities—one species of causal responsibilities—belong in the first instance to collectives, although they will also trickle down to at least some individuals within the collective. Other responsibilities—humanitarian responsibilities, and a different species of causal responsibilities—belong in the first instance to individuals, but can, I shall argue, “trickle up” to collectives of which individuals are members.

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One source of responsibility I want to discuss can be called *causal*: it represents ways in which agents can cause (or, more precisely, make causal contributions to) others’ poverty. Later in the chapter I distinguish two different types of causal responsibility, but for now I refer to them together as the Causal Argument. A second kind of responsibility arises when agents have benefited from a situation that involves others’ poverty, although the agents have not causally contributed to its existence. I call this the Benefiting-From Argument. The third source I consider is the Humanitarian Argument, which claims that

¹ I generally use the term “responsibility” rather than “duty” or “obligation,” which have a more determinate and legalistic ring that sometimes seems to cause people to dig in their heels. Conversations over the years have convinced me that there is an important difference here. People may believe that they have a moral *responsibility* to help others—they ought to, they would be blameworthy if they didn’t, etc.—but they resist the idea that they have a moral *duty* or *obligation* to help. Perhaps they believe that duty or obligation suggest coercion, and they oppose the idea that the state may coerce a person to help. Strictly speaking, however, the coercion is purely moral. In any case, the term “responsibility” is somewhat broader and weaker, I believe, than “duty” or “obligation,” and I mostly use it here in order not to beg any important questions.

agents can have responsibilities to alleviate poverty even if they have neither caused it or benefited from it.

In the next section I make some explanatory points about the idea of causation in this context. I go on to sketch the Causal and the Humanitarian Arguments. The contrast between these two is the sharpest and will make it easier to see what is at issue in the Benefiting-From Argument and in the second kind of Causal Argument. After setting out the various kinds of responsibilities, I take up the question of whether or to what extent they are individual or collective.

Cause and causal contribution

Almost everyone believes that there's a strong presumption that if an agent has caused harm to another then the agent has a duty to compensate the other or to remedy the harm. More than that: many believe that the *strongest* or even the *only* reason for thinking an agent ought to remedy a harm is that she has caused it or causally contributed to it.²

Of course it's no simple matter to say what it means for an agent to have caused harm to another. The intuitive idea is that something the agent has done has made the other worse off. But there are several qualifications.

First, not every case of making another worse off counts as harm in the relevant sense. If that were so all forms of competition would have to be forbidden or their effects on others compensated for. Winning a race, scoring high on an exam, opening a business, being chosen as a lover over someone else—all may make others worse off. But we don't

² I take the latter view as equivalent to what Christopher Kutz calls the Individual Difference Principle: "I am accountable for a harm only if what I have done made a difference to that harm's occurrence" (Kutz 2000, 116).

normally think doing these things gives rise to duties to refrain from acting or to compensate those who have lost out.

Second, to give rise to a duty to remedy it's not enough to have performed an act that is a necessary condition for the harm coming about. (In the law such conditions are called "but for" causes or—misleadingly, I think—causes in fact.) If that were sufficient, zillions of agents would be causally responsible for zillions of things that we normally deny they are responsible for. If Cleopatra's nose had been shorter, Pascal said, the whole course of history would have been different.³ But we don't conclude that the length of Cleopatra's nose caused World War II. What we call *the* cause of an event depends largely on pragmatic considerations—we pick out significant and alterable factors, often those resulting from human agency.⁴ So the very idea of cause is inescapably normative. Moreover, in attributing moral or legal responsibility in complex situations we may resist the idea of *the* cause, and speak instead of causal contributions.⁵

Third, even if causal responsibility suggests moral responsibility, the presumption is rebuttable. Although some defend the idea of strict moral liability—liability without fault—we typically think it inappropriate to hold agents morally responsible if they causally contribute to a harmful outcome but do so without fault.

What is fault? Normally agents are at fault for harmful outcomes if they knew their behavior would cause harm; or, if they didn't know, they could have known and should have known. The United States Model Penal Code outlines four degrees of legal

³ Pascal 1660, Section 2.

⁴ For an exhaustive discussion see Hart and Honoré 1985. The legal concept of proximate cause is similarly pragmatic. It is unhelpfully defined in *Black's Law Dictionary* as "a cause that is legally sufficient to result in liability."

⁵ In what follows I will be considering moral rather than legal responsibility. But in general similar considerations apply.

culpability, but these hold as well for moral culpability: causing harm intentionally, knowingly, recklessly, negligently.⁶ Making these judgments can be difficult, and the conclusions drawn will often be controversial.

Despite these complexities and qualifications, I will proceed under the following assumptions: first, we have some understanding of what it means for an agent to bear some causal responsibility for—to causally contribute to—a harm; and second, there is a presumption that agents who are causally responsible for harmful consequences bear some moral responsibility for remedying them.

Causal responsibility is a species of what I call relational responsibilities, those depending on something agents have done, roles they occupy, or relationships they bear to would-be recipients of reparative action. But not all moral responsibilities are relational. Agents can be morally responsible for remedying harms even if they are not causally responsible for their existence and bear no special relation to those harmed. This is what I call the Humanitarian Argument, described further in the next section.

Two sources of moral responsibility

In contemporary debates about our responsibilities to alleviate global poverty, two approaches exemplify the distinction between the Causal and Humanitarian Arguments. One, represented by Thomas Pogge, Richard Miller, and others, argues that we rich people in rich countries are morally obligated to remedy global poverty because we are

⁶ Model Penal Code 1962, §2.02. The American Law Institute commissioned the Model Penal Code “to stimulate and assist legislatures in making a major effort to appraise the content of the penal law”; ALI at https://www.ali.org/index.cfm?fuseaction=publications.ppage&node_id=92

causally responsible for it; its existence is at least partly our fault.⁷ (Again, I'll shortly address who *we* are.) The other approach, represented most notably by Peter Singer, argues that we are morally obligated to alleviate poverty not because it's our fault but, roughly, because poor people suffer greatly and we can do something to help without sacrificing anything nearly as important.⁸ Although in places Singer also maintains that we are at fault for harming the poor, that's not his main argument, which rests on his utilitarianism. Singer argues that the benefits to the poor of alleviating poverty greatly outweigh the costs to us. (Singer also assumes that we can be effective in this effort, which many will contest. But I'll take it for granted here.)

But you don't have to be a utilitarian to agree that agents ought to act to remedy poverty even if it's not their fault. The grounds might be a little different from Singer's, but even among those who reject utilitarianism the underlying sentiment is similar: there's no contest between the losses we might bear to alleviate dire poverty and the gains to those who endure it. This is what I call the Humanitarian Argument.

Let me make a few remarks about these two contrasting approaches.

First, two terminological points. One is that the difference between these two approaches is sometimes expressed in the language of "negative" and "positive" duties. The Causal Argument is sometimes expressed by saying that agents have a negative duty not to harm others and to repair the harm if they do. The Humanitarian Argument is said to articulate a positive duty. Furthermore, some people believe we have *only* negative duties not to harm people but, in the absence of a special relationship, role, or agreement,

⁷ See, e.g., Pogge 2002; Pogge 2009; Miller 2010.

⁸ Peter Singer 2010, 15-6. Singer first made this argument, which was instrumental in inciting the debate about our responsibilities to alleviate global poverty, in Singer 1972.

no positive duties to aid them.⁹ Defenders of the Humanitarian Argument, by contrast, think we have natural or uncontracted positive as well as negative duties.¹⁰

A related terminological point is that some would draw the distinction between the Causal and Humanitarian Arguments in terms of justice. They would say that if A has caused harm to B then A owes B compensation or reparation as a matter of justice, while if A has not caused harm (and has no other relational duty to B) any duty of A to B is a matter of humanitarianism, beneficence, or charity rather than justice.¹¹

Of course, the two approaches are not mutually exclusive. Obviously, one can believe people have responsibilities to alleviate poverty both because they have causally contributed to it and also on humanitarian grounds.

The next point is more important and substantive. On its face the Humanitarian Argument is controversial in a way the Causal Argument is not. Most people will agree that if you have caused harm there's a presumption that you have a duty to remedy it. Of course, as we have already seen, there are still crucial questions about which people will disagree. How should we understand *harm*? How should we understand *cause*? Is *fault* necessary to liability? These are not trivial matters, to say the least.

But about the Humanitarian Argument there's an even more fundamental disagreement. As we have seen, some people deny its force altogether, insisting we are morally responsible for remedying harms and suffering *only* if we are causally

⁹ This view is akin to what Kutz calls the Individual Difference Principle, noted above (Kutz 2000, 116), that one is accountable for a harm only if one's behavior made a difference to the harm's occurrence.

¹⁰ At the same time, those who defend uncontracted positive duties often also downplay the distinction between negative and positive duties. The *locus classicus* for this approach is Shue 1996 (1980); see also Lichtenberg 2014, chapter 3, 4, and *passim*. See the next section for further discussion.

¹¹ See, e.g., Moller 2014 for this view. The justice/charity distinction does not always track the causal/noncausal distinction but seems at least to coincide with the relational/nonrelational distinction. See, e.g., Nagel 2005, 121; "justice is something we owe through our shared institutions only to those with whom we stand in a strong political relation," i.e. a state.

responsible for their existence. I believe political libertarians fall into this category (even though it may seem they only deny the appropriateness of state coercion to enforce the moral duty to aid).¹²

On its face, then, the Humanitarian Argument seems weaker, because some will simply deny its force wholesale—while, on the other hand, if you can persuade people that they have caused harm to others you’re usually well on your way to convincing them they have reparative duties. But in another way the weakness of the Humanitarian Argument is also a strength, and the strength of the Causal Argument a weakness. The Causal Argument rests on complex and controversial empirical premises about the underlying mechanisms responsible for global poverty. And many dispute these premises. Some, like Matthias Risse, deny the force of the Causal Argument at least in part because of the enormous decline over the years in the proportion of people worldwide who live in poverty—even though there are as many or more *poor* people in the world today as there were *people* two hundred years ago.¹³ Others, like Dan Moller, opt for the Great Divergence hypothesis, according to which, in a series of events beginning hundreds of years ago, “the rich got rich through economic growth, and the poor didn’t *become* poor at all, but rather *remained* poor because of an absence of growth.”¹⁴ On these views, the different fates of rich and poor countries over the past centuries did not result from injustice or exploitation by the rich toward to the poor, even if injustice and exploitation surely occurred along the way.

I will not attempt to sort out the truth about these matters here, but it’s remarkable how certain proponents and opponents of these views are about what the truth is. The

¹² I argue for this conclusion in Lichtenberg 2014, 24-7.

¹³ Risse 2009.

¹⁴ Moller 2014, 95.

advantage of the Humanitarian Argument is that it doesn't rest on controversial empirical assumptions about causal mechanisms, although, as we have seen, that doesn't mean it's indisputable.¹⁵ But it must be disputed on moral rather than empirical grounds. And many will find that to repudiate it entirely is just not plausible. I certainly think so.

Another reason the Causal Argument may seem stronger than the Humanitarian Argument is that having causally contributed to a harm generally gives agents a further reason to repair it, over and above any humanitarian reason they may have. So in general when we find causal contribution we find two reasons to act instead of one, perhaps illicitly adding to the impression of the Causal Argument's strength.

Blurring the boundaries

Having sharply distinguished arguments that rest on a causal claim of harm from those that do not, I now want to blur the boundaries.

When one claims that A has harmed B, one implicitly assumes a baseline or benchmark. A has made B worse off. Worse off than what? In standard individual contexts of the sort most often at issue in tort law—physical or financial harm to individuals—the answer is pretty clear: A has made B worse off than B would have been had A not done what she did, all else being the same. If A had not run B down in the street, B would have continued intact across to the other side. If C had not stolen money from D, D would have had that much more money. No other events come in to fill the void.

¹⁵ And of course proponents of the Humanitarian Argument, like defenders of the Causal Argument, must confront questions about causal *efficacy*: about what steps are effective in eradicating poverty.

But in large-scale contexts like global poverty, establishing the baseline is difficult or impossible. The problem is especially acute when thinking about causal contributions long past. Consider the popular view that colonialism in earlier centuries has harmed contemporary poor people in developing countries. Understanding the baseline in the traditional way, we would need to know what would have happened to those people in the absence of colonialism, and whether they would have been better off than they are today. Derek Parfit puts the issue most acutely in his famous nonidentity problem. Had different events taken place a hundred or more years ago, different people would have existed today than actually do; those who exist would not have existed in the absence of colonialism. Therefore, those who exist today cannot claim to have been *harmed* by colonialism, because that implies they would have been better off without it. But they wouldn't have *existed* without it.¹⁶

Much ink has been spilled attempting to resolve Parfit's paradox—to show why, even if contemporary people have not been made worse off than they would have been, wrong has been done and contemporary people have cause for complaint and even grounds for reparative action.¹⁷ (Non-philosophers sometimes find the nonidentity problem proof of the sophistry of philosophy; last year some of my students rose up in outrage against it.) I believe we have good reasons for accepting the commonsense view that contemporary people have legitimate claims against old wrongs even though they would not have existed but for those wrongs. But I will say only a little (in subsequent sections) to defend that conclusion here.

¹⁶ Parfit 1984, chapter 16.

¹⁷ For an account of the voluminous literature see Roberts 2013.

Determining baselines can be difficult even when many years have not passed. If corporation E had not opened operations in country F, what would have happened instead? Would some other entity or entities have done something else in its place? To what are we comparing the effects of E's conduct on F? If we cannot know what the baseline is, either we have to abandon the claim of harm or significantly revise it. Pogge takes the latter approach, arguing that harm can be understood in terms of "an independently specified conception of social justice," so that "we are *harming* the global poor if and insofar as we collaborate in imposing an *unjust* global institutional order upon them."¹⁸

In making this move, Pogge introduces an explicitly normative element into the concept of harm, but he fails to acknowledge it. In so doing, he seems to have defied his own claim to rely only on negative duties as a basis for moral responsibilities to remedy suffering. Given the baseline problem, he may have no choice, which means that the distinction between negative and positive duties, and between duties of justice and duties of charity or beneficence, on which so much contemporary philosophical discussion (including Pogge's) has rested, loses its sharpness.¹⁹

Benefiting from others' bad circumstances

Another argument for a responsibility to alleviate global poverty might be viewed as intermediate in persuasive force between the Causal and the Humanitarian Arguments. This is the idea that you have some duty to repair a bad situation if you benefit from it, even if you have not causally contributed to its existence.

¹⁸ Pogge 2009, 311. Emphasis in original.

¹⁹ See Shue 1996, chapter 2; Lichtenberg 2014, chapter 4; and Ashford 2009, for this and other reasons for this conclusion.

A familiar species of the Benefiting-From Argument concerns exploitation. In one understanding, when you exploit others you do not make them worse off than they would have been but for your involvement.²⁰ Let's assume that some workers in developing countries who accept poor wages and working conditions from a transnational company are still better off than they would have been without the job in question. Yet those who employ them (and by extension consumers who buy the products they make) benefit from the workers' bad bargaining situation. And we may object that there's something wrong with taking advantage of people's dire circumstances in this way.

But one can benefit from harms to others even without exploiting them. In fact, such situations are extremely common. Suppose you come from a rich family whose wealth was founded several generations back on theft, violence, or coercion. We might agree that you should not be held responsible for the harms done by your forebears—the children should not suffer for the sins of their parents. But do you owe something to descendants of those your ancestors harmed insofar as you benefit, and they suffer setbacks, as a result of them? Even if your ancestors were in no way responsible for the current circumstances (perhaps your parents were immigrants), you may still benefit from belonging to a certain group or from not belonging to another group. Even if discrimination and racism against African Americans no longer existed today, contemporary African Americans would still suffer economic and other disadvantages from its legacy, and those who are not African American would benefit, at least in this

²⁰ Exploitation does not always have this meaning, although it's common in philosophical discussions. We say that child pornography exploits children without thinking it makes them better off in any way. I owe this point to Amelia Uelman.

respect.²¹ As Richard Rothstein puts it, “Policies that are no longer in effect and seemingly have been reformed still cast a long shadow.”²²

By hypothesis, the contemporary beneficiaries are without fault (at least in this respect). The question is whether their relative privilege, insofar as it rests on others’ reprehensible behavior even if long past, gives rise to reparative responsibilities. Those wedded to harm as the only legitimate reason for a duty to act will say no. But those who reject the Humanitarian Argument may still find the Benefiting-From Argument to have force, since it rests on a relationship between those benefited and those harmed; the privileges of the privileged have their source in the harms of the harmed. And presumably anyone convinced by the pure Humanitarian Argument will agree that benefiting from others’ misfortune is an even stronger ground for remedial responsibilities than pure humanitarianism.

Further thoughts about benefiting from others’ bad circumstances

Let me take up two further points about the Benefiting-From Argument.

First, it might be suspected that the Benefiting-From Argument collapses into the Causal Argument. The thought goes something like this: Imagine a contemporary family whose wealth rests on the ill-gotten gains of its great-grandparents, whose riches depended on harming other people. The children of the family benefit from excellent education, valuable connections, and the opportunities and relief from psychic stress that

²¹ This is not to say that all white Americans are better off than all black Americans all things considered, only that in this respect—racial membership—white people are advantaged.

²² Rothstein 2014b, 4; a shorter version is Rothstein 2014a. Both illustrate the point with numerous vivid examples. For a recent defense of reparations resulting from the legacy of slavery and oppression of African Americans, see Coates 2014.

financial resources bring.²³ It might be argued that these children not only benefit from their unearned privilege but causally contribute to preserving the system that impedes descendants of those harmed and impoverished from becoming un-poor. Insofar as certain goods—like places in elite universities and high-status jobs—are inherently scarce, the gains of the privileged are others’ losses, and the former can be said to causally contribute to the continued deprivations of the latter.

There is some validity to this line of thinking, but it doesn’t entail that the distinction between the Benefiting-From and the Causal Argument collapses entirely. For one thing, members of the privileged family might work to compensate for their good fortune. They might be politically active in progressive causes; they might donate significant sums to or invest in organizations working to reduce poverty and inequality for descendants of those who suffered at the hands of ancestors of the privileged. They might even avoid taking advantage of benefits available to them—for example, the children might avoid applying to their parents’ alma maters, thereby foregoing any legacy advantages. (Of course, it doesn’t follow that more slots would go to disadvantaged students.)

Insofar as social or economic goods are scarce and positional, some having more means others have less. But not all goods are like this. And insofar as goods are not positional, the benefits from gains ill-gotten a few generations back do not necessarily contribute to harms to others today. Moreover, even in the case of positional goods, people can compensate for their advantages, and some do. If this line of reasoning is right, then the Benefiting-Argument does not necessarily collapse into the Causal Argument.

²³ For discussion of the idea that “poverty is a domineering context” that depletes “mental resources, such as attention, planning, problem solving, and self-control,” see Mullainathan and Shafir 2013a, passage quoted from 291-2; and Mullainathan and Shafir 2013b.

The second point is that benefiting from others' bad circumstances exemplifies a source or mode of moral responsibility often described in terms of *complicity*. The concept of complicity is complex and somewhat indeterminate—surely there is no correct analysis of what it means to be complicit. But I think it's fair to say that we invoke complicity when causal arguments for harm do not apply but there is nevertheless some kind of involvement with or relationship to harm to others. Benefiting from others' bad circumstances is not the only way one can be complicit, but it seems to me paradigmatic.²⁴

The question of when causal arguments for harm apply brings me to a distinction I promised earlier to introduce; I turn to it now.

I and we

The Causal Argument encompasses two different modes of causal connection. They have different implications for the nature of causally based responsibilities—whether they are ultimately individual or collective—and for that reason it's important to distinguish them.

²⁴ David Schwartz distinguishes between the causal and the complicity accounts of consumer culpability (Schwartz 2010). Schwartz's conception of complicity is drawn from Kutz's view: "I am accountable for what others do when I intentionally participate in the wrong they do or harm they cause...independently of the actual difference I make" (Kutz 2000, 71)—in other words, independently of whether I causally contribute to harm. As Schwartz notes, the main challenge to Kutz's account is to show that acts like consumer purchases are "sufficiently similar to collective situations in which the complicity explanation seems cogent" (Schwartz 2010, 74). Kutz's example of the latter is the Dresden firebombing—where it seems right to say that a pilot is complicit in the destruction even if his particular act of bomb-dropping made no real difference to the outcome. Whether Kutz's view can cover consumer purchases, energy consumption, and the like depends, of course, on how one understands "intentional participation." My hunch is that it requires stretching the notion of intentional participation further than is plausible. It doesn't follow that in these cases we are not complicit; the alternative is that Kutz's notion of complicity is too narrow.

The Causal Argument as I earlier described it—hereafter Causal Argument^C—is in the first instance collective. We regularly make judgments, and without puzzlement, about the actions of collective agents like states or corporations, which are legal persons. Following Virginia Held, we might say that what renders a state or corporation an organized group or collectivity is “its possession of a decision method for action.”²⁵ Imagine a state that unjustly invades another country and plunders its resources. The army belongs to the state, acts on behalf of the state, and is under the governance of the state. If the state has done wrong, it is this collective agent that is responsible for compensation or reparation.

How does a collective agent’s responsibility relate to that of its constituent members—its citizens, if it’s a state, or its employees, if it’s a corporation? Held rightly argues that one cannot infer from the fact that a collectivity C ought not to have done A that any particular member M ought not to have done A.²⁶ But from the fact that a collectivity did A and ought not to have done A, it seems we can infer at least this: *some* member or members did A or something necessary to A and ought not to have done it.

Typically, a state’s leaders will bear primary liability. But in any society with a claim to be democratic, the state’s liability will trickle down to its citizens. If a body of international law declared the state’s action illegitimate and demanded compensation to the plundered country, it would be appropriate for the aggressive state’s citizens to bear some of the burden, probably a monetary one extracted through taxes for reparations.

What if the state is not democratic and its citizens have little or no say in what its leaders do? The less individuals have control over or input into the government’s

²⁵ Held 1970, 89.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 93. This implies, at least loosely, that from the fact that a collectivity did A we cannot infer that any particular member did A.

decisions, the less they should bear the costs of compensation or reparation when the state does wrong. Of course, it's unrealistic to suppose both that an authoritarian state in violation of moral or legal norms would comply with demands to right its wrongs, and also that if it did it would spare its ordinary citizens any burdens. But the point here is to understand in the ideal the relationship between collective and individual responsibility.

Suppose some citizens in a democratic state work to oppose what they see as its illegitimate actions. Are those citizens thereby released from the responsibility to share in the burden of compensating the victims? The answer depends partly on questions of democratic theory. If you think the majority position binds the minority, then even dissidents must do their share. And those who oppose the state's action on the grounds that it harms innocent people might very well voluntarily accept partial responsibility for their state's actions, because they recognize their membership in the state and the ways they may benefit even from actions they oppose.

So the main points about Causal Argument^C—where a state or other collective agent as such takes actions that unjustly harm others—are these. (1) It is the state, a collective agent, that bears primary responsibility. (2) One cannot directly infer that any individual belonging to the state bears liability. (3) But some individuals will bear some liability. (4) Other things being equal, ordinary people will bear greater liability in democratic societies than in nondemocratic ones.

The second strand of the Causal Argument

But not all the grounds on which affluent people might have responsibilities to alleviate global poverty are captured by the kinds of cases just described, in which a state

or other corporate entity takes action, and causes harm, *as* a corporate entity. The other grounds encompass what I call the second strand of the Causal Argument, hereafter Causal Argument¹.

The example that most clearly exemplifies what I have in mind is climate change. As Dale Jamieson puts it:

The climate change issue can be seen at its core as centering on rich people appropriating more than their share of a global public good and, as a result, harming poor people by causally contributing to extreme climatic events such as droughts, hurricanes, and heat waves, which in turn can ramify, causing disease outbreaks, economic dislocations, and political instability.²⁷

Most of the ways we harm people through climate change and through consumer choices and purchases differ sharply from the way states and corporations harm people in the examples given earlier. In contrast to these latter cases, the acts in question occur as a result of the accumulations of billions of tiny, and in themselves harmless, acts by millions or billions of people over time.²⁸ So no individual (even the most energy-profligate) causally contributes to more than an infinitesimal fraction of the total harm

²⁷ Jamieson 2014, 148. Jamieson suggests that climate change is unique in this regard, unlike any other problem we face. I'm not sure it differs fundamentally from other kinds of behavior we engage in that have far-reaching consequences for poor people across the globe, such as buying clothing made in sweatshops or cell phones containing coltan, a mineral found in the Democratic Republic of Congo whose mining has fueled violence and suffering. Later in the chapter in which this passage appears, Jamieson calls into question whether causal language is appropriate in this context. I don't find his reasons for doubt convincing. Holding agents fractionally responsible for these kinds of harms can be understood on the model of market share liability in cases of mass torts. For example, even though we don't know for sure that a particular pharmaceutical company that manufactured 20 percent of a drug that caused cancer to pregnant women or their descendants actually caused 20 percent of the cancers (let alone which 20 percent), it's reasonable to hold that company liable for 20 percent of the damages. See *Sindell v. Abbott Laboratories* 1980; also *Summers v. Tice* 1948.

For a good discussion of whether causal language is appropriate in these contexts (and an affirmative answer), see Schwartz 2010, chapter 3.

²⁸ This is of course not to deny that corporate entities as such can pollute and contribute to climate change and other harms.

done. We can say similar things about buying products made in sweatshops or containing scarce resources illicitly procured from poor countries: an individual's contribution to the harm is infinitesimal. One might then think that agents who perform these acts are blameless, since what they do is intrinsically morally neutral and they contribute so little to the harm. Add the fact that many of these people are unaware of the consequences of what they do, and that many of those cannot be held responsible for their ignorance.

And yet these acts are not in fact morally neutral. We might not think people are morally *blameworthy* for doing these things—that will depend partly on whether they are aware of the consequences of what they do, or whether, if they are ignorant, they can be held responsible for their ignorance. Even aside from these questions, it might not be useful to blame them or make them feel guilty; doing so might be counterproductive or might make unreasonable demands on ordinary human beings. Nevertheless, we have good reason to discourage this behavior and will want, at the very least, to design institutions and environments that make it easier for people to avoid engaging in it.²⁹

Although actions of this kind causally contribute to harms, it's obvious that they have a very different character from those discussed earlier, which result from the acts and decisions of collective agents like states and corporations. These, by contrast, are individual acts. Does that mean that when we ask about *our* responsibilities—as Americans, for example, or as affluent people—to change our behavior we are simply talking about the responsibility of individuals A plus B plus C...N, with no genuine *we* to be found?

²⁹ If blame and perhaps even fault are not appropriate, at least as blanket judgments of all the individuals involved, does it make sense to think that these actions should be regarded on the model of strict liability offenses?

I think the nature of the I-we relation in these cases resembles the relation we find in humanitarian responsibilities. The resemblance is not perfect, and the differences are instructive. It will be clearer to first examine the I-we relationships in the Humanitarian Argument, and then return to Causal Argument¹.

The *we* in the Humanitarian Argument

Recall the premise of the Humanitarian Argument: that many of us have much more than we need, and that this state of affairs seems at best unseemly and at worst wrong in light of the fact that more than a billion people have so much less than they need.

The ultimate questions are whether those who have much more than they need, however defined, have a duty to act to improve the situation of the poor; and if so, how strong a duty they have. But here I'm ignoring the ultimate questions, important as they are, and asking a different one: who is this *we* anyway? Is it primarily a collective agent of some kind, as in Causal Argument^C? It might seem to be a state or nation such as the United States, the richest country in the world. A good candidate, you might think, for a humanitarian duty to aid the bottom billion. And we do sometimes talk this way, as if it's *we as Americans* (or Britons or Germans, etc.) who should do something.

Yet when people assert that *we* have a responsibility to alleviate poverty they sometimes seem to mean by *we* not Americans per se but rich people more generally. Rich people are certainly a group (the group of people who are rich!) but, unlike members of a state, they are not an organized group. They seem to fit Held's definition of a random collection of individuals": "a set of persons distinguishable by some

characteristics from the set of all persons, but lacking a decision method for taking action...”³⁰

It is at least partly for this reason—the absence of group decisionmaking or even coordinated action—that humanitarian responsibilities are primarily individual rather than collective. Whether we conceive the group in question as “rich people” or “Americans,” our responsibilities derive not from actions we perform *as* a group or from our identity *as members* of a group but rather from our existence and status as individuals. Of course, the traits that render us morally responsible to aid others derive partly from advantages conferred on us because we happen to reside in a rich country. Still, it’s our situation as individuals that grounds our humanitarian responsibilities to distant others—which explains why Americans lacking these advantages may be exempt from them. Moreover, quite independent of this point is the idea that a humanitarian responsibility seems to be something that can ultimately be borne only by human beings—agents capable of empathy, concern, and caring.

But that doesn’t mean these responsibilities cannot become collective. Trickle-down duties exist where the *source* of the duty is a collective agent that genuinely acts, as when a state makes war (or treaties, for that matter). In such cases the question remains how the collective’s duty percolates down to duties of individuals. With humanitarian duties, on the other hand, the duties begin with individual actors. But they may trickle up to collectives.

How could that happen? Assume a person has some responsibility to help others in need when she herself is not in need and can help without undue cost to herself.

³⁰ Held 1970, 89. The term “random” may be misleading and confusing, but I think it’s clear enough for my purposes here.

Imagine that we have settled the question of how extensive the responsibility is: a person's responsibility is some function of time, effort, and material resources that we represent as N . So my duty is to do amount N , although I have discretion about how to fulfill it. (N will of course be different for different people, depending on their resources, abilities, etc.)

Yet duties involving discretion must also entail duties to reflect on how to discharge them. A person is at fault who claims to be helping others but in fact acts unthinkingly and ineffectively or even counterproductively when she could have done otherwise and should have known better.

It's reasonable for a person to think that the most effective way to help others in need is not to act alone as an individual but to promote institutions that can alter the social, economic, and political conditions associated with poverty. As Henry Shue puts it, it is "desirable that we should have organized and institutionalized means of carrying out the positive duties of individual persons. Isolated and uncoordinated efforts by individuals are materially wasteful and can be psychologically oppressive to no good purpose."³¹ Collective efforts are more effective; they are also less onerous to individuals, because acting together reduces the degree of sacrifice, and the sense of sacrifice, of those who aid.³² In addition, such efforts are less likely to demean aid's recipients, in part because they are more likely to lead to structural change that makes poor people less dependent on the kindness of strangers. Those who agree with these propositions will work to fulfill their humanitarian duties at least partly by trying to collectivize them; they will take political action, try to convince others to lobby for changes in policy or to

³¹ Shue 1988, 697.

³² For defense of these points see Lichtenberg 2014, especially chapter 6.

contribute to organizations that work for such changes. They will think that, insofar as the responsibility to aid entails a responsibility to consider how best to aid, their responsibility is to collectivize action.

Robert Goodin has developed an idea of this kind, arguing that “social institutions, paradigmatically the state,” should be understood as “consolidators” of individual duties such as the duty to render aid.³³ Goodin is concerned primarily with transfers from rich to poor within a state, but the general point holds: treating the state as a consolidator makes it easier for people to discharge their responsibilities effectively.³⁴

Of course, this does not by itself show that individual duties do in fact become collective in any strong sense. Some people might continue to discharge their duties simply as individuals—by giving money to Oxfam or Doctors Without Borders, say—believing that is how they can best act, and we might be hard pressed to criticize them. Perhaps we should say that however great or small *N* is—the “amount” of your responsibility—you have discretion to discharge it as you see fit, acting in good faith and by your own lights. Some will choose to act as individuals, contributing time, money, or effort to directly effect change; others will choose to engage in political action to effect structural and institutional change. But none of this is to deny that there’s a good case to be made for collectivizing individual humanitarian responsibilities.

Trickle-up responsibilities in Causal Argument¹

This way of conceiving the relationship between individual and collective responsibilities seems reasonably apt in the case of the Humanitarian Argument. But

³³ Goodin 2009, 2.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 33.

Causal Argument¹ differs in important ways. In this case the source of the responsibility to remedy poverty lies not in an irreducible human duty to render aid (however grounded and whatever its limits) but in having causally contributed to or participated in the damage to be repaired. And a central feature of these situations, I believe, is that it is impossible to repair the harms without coordinated efforts. While one might be able to help distant strangers by individual direct efforts, ceasing to harm them by individual efforts—by reducing one’s energy consumption, for example—is probably futile.³⁵

I can illustrate the problem with an example borrowed from Virginia Held. Held asks us to imagine

three unacquainted pedestrians on an isolated street. A small building collapses; a man inside is trapped; he calls to the three for help. He is bleeding from a lower-leg injury and needs immediate assistance. All four persons know that a tourniquet should be applied to his thigh, but this cannot be done until various beams are removed, and removing any would require the strength of all three.³⁶

Note that because the pedestrians have not causally contributed to the collapse of the building, their responsibility to act in this example rests on what I have been calling humanitarian grounds (although Held does not use this language.) But the example illustrates a feature of Causal Argument¹ that I have suggested distinguishes it, in the case of global poverty, from the Humanitarian Argument: that the bystanders cannot be effective without taking joint action.³⁷

³⁵ For further defense of this point see Lichtenberg 2010, and Lichtenberg 2014, chapter 4.

³⁶ Held 1970, 96.

³⁷ In case one thinks that Held’s example therefore doesn’t illustrate the problem at hand, we could revise it accordingly: imagine that the pedestrians have each removed small chips off the building as souvenirs; none of these acts alone would have caused the building to collapse but all of them together do. Of course, the example then loses its refreshingly plausible and down-to-earth character and assumes the fantastical

Held goes on to stipulate that the three bystanders disagree about how to proceed, and that while they argue “the man slowly bleeds to death.” Proceeding with any of the three strategies would have prevented his death. Held argues that “the random collection can be held morally responsible for failing to make a decision on which action to take.” More generally, a random collection of individuals is responsible for “constituting itself into a group capable of deciding upon an action. . .when it is obvious to the reasonable person that action rather than inaction by the collection is called for.”³⁸

So here it seems we have an explanation of how individual duties can trickle up to collectives. Assuming that individuals causally contribute to global poverty—through their contributions to climate change, among other things—they bear some responsibility on that ground for remedying the harm. But if, as I assume, it is impossible for them to discharge their duties as individuals acting alone (for example, by reducing their energy consumption), then the duty is a duty to bring about collective change so that a collective or corporate agent can consolidate, in Goodin’s term, the responsibilities of individuals and fulfill them effectively.

What makes the collectivization of responsibility in such cases effective has to do not only with the output but also the input. It’s not just that in order to make a significant difference in the reduction of greenhouse gases, for example, we need collective efforts, but that individuals will be more motivated to act by the prospect of collective action,

quality typical of examples in contemporary analytic philosophy—a quality that often makes it impossible to trust our “intuitions,” if any, about such cases.

³⁸ Held 1970, 97.

because acting together with others makes fewer demands on individuals mentally and materially than does acting alone.³⁹

So the reasons generating a collective responsibility in Causal Argument^I, while still ultimately derived from individual responsibilities, is stronger than in the Humanitarian Argument, as a result of the greater necessity of collective action in the former case than the latter.

But perhaps, it might be argued, the difference is overdrawn, because it relies on a sharp distinction between negative and positive duties, and between refraining and acting, of the kind I have sought to cast doubt on. The thinking in support of a difference goes something like this. You can fulfill a humanitarian responsibility by donating to or investing in organizations committed to poverty reduction and development. But I'm asserting that you can't fulfill a causally-based responsibility in this way, because fulfilling it requires ceasing to harm rather than aiding, and that's impossible to do as an isolated individual. Yet it might be thought that in fact one *can* go some way toward fulfilling the causally-based responsibility by investing in these same organizations, and thus one can do so alone and in isolation from others. If this is right, then the extent to which individual duties trickle up to collective duties does not differ greatly between the Humanitarian and Causal Argument^I.⁴⁰

I will not attempt to resolve this question here, and will rest with asserting that at the very least both these arguments differ from Causal Argument^C, which is in the first

³⁹ I alluded to the reasons for this conclusion earlier (and discuss them at length in Lichtenberg 2014, chapter 6). This reasoning applies as well to the Humanitarian Argument.

⁴⁰ The same reasoning could be applied to the Benefiting-From Argument, but I will spare the reader from analyzing it here.

instance collective and only derivatively individual. In the Humanitarian Argument and in Causal Argument¹ the relationship is reversed.

Bringing human rights into the picture

So far I have considered only responsibilities and duties, investigating their sources and their individual or collective character. It might be wondered why I have not discussed rights—more specifically the rights, or human rights, of those who live in dire poverty. I will close by explaining why I have so far avoided talking about rights and why nonetheless I believe the foregoing analysis might help pave the way for a constructive employment of them.

In contemporary discussions of rights it's axiomatic that rights and duties are correlative: for it to be meaningful—more than simply the expression of an aspiration—to assert that someone has a right to x (whether x is a good, an act, or a forbearance from acting), duties of at least one agent must be specified. It's easy, then, to see the difficulty with rights to *stuff*, like a decent standard of living. For such rights to be real and meaningful, we must be able to say who has the duty to fulfill them or not to violate them.⁴¹ And as long as we limit the assignment of responsibilities or duties to individual agents, without intermediaries, it will be impossible to fulfill the right, because no individual could possibly do it, or even, in many cases, to know what the duty entails.⁴² At most one could have a duty to do one's part.

⁴¹ This does not mean that the right to a decent standard of living is best fulfilled by giving people stuff. But it will probably be necessary for comfortable people to act affirmatively in certain ways, not only if the duties are grounded in reparations for harm but also if they are rooted in humanitarianism.

⁴² For criticism on these grounds of rights to material well-being, see O'Neill 2005.

But once people are, or think of themselves as, members of an organized group—a *we*—it becomes not only natural but in some cases necessary to conceive their responsibilities as responsibilities to do their part in a larger, collective enterprise.

Now one might think there is a simpler argument for this conclusion that goes roughly like this:

P1. People have human rights to a decent standard of living.

P2. Such rights can only be fulfilled if others act collectively.

C. Therefore, these others have duties to act collectively.

But this argument clearly begs a central question. An important reason to doubt whether people do have such rights, as Onora O’Neill does, is that the argument for correlative duties, and in particular the collective ones necessary to satisfy these rights, has not been made. In claims of rights, duties do the work and bear the burdens. That can be a reason for beginning not with rights but with duties. But having shown, I hope, how we might bootstrap individual responsibilities into collective ones, we may then have the resources to argue that a human right to a decent minimum is not pie in the sky.

Goodin suggests an argument along these lines:

Start from the premise that, pre-institutionally. . .the rich have an imperfect duty to aid the poor. . . But being imperfect, no one's duties are owed to anyone in particular. Then introduce a collective social institution (the state, for example) to serve as “consolidator” of all those imperfect duties. Let that institution embrace everyone who owes such duties and everyone to whom they are owed. All of the

rich would then have a perfect duty to pay taxes to the state; and the state in turn has a perfect duty to provide assistance to everyone who needs it.⁴³

Goodin is here describing relationships between rich and poor within a state, but the same argument can be made transnationally. Human rights can be rendered fully real and meaningful only when linked to the determinate duties of other agents. If the best or in some cases the only way to perfect duties—and to render them more than vague “responsibilities”—is to collectivize them, then that is what we ought to be doing.⁴⁴

⁴³ Goodin 2009, 8. According to the traditional Kantian view, imperfect duties allow a great deal of latitude as to time, place, manner, and (most importantly) extent; and they do not correlate with rights on the part of others, as perfect duties do.

⁴⁴ Note that insofar as the argument begins from human rights, it does not depend on the assumption that duty-bearers have harmed rights-bearers; in that respect the duties are akin to humanitarian duties.

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